

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
CALIFORNIA DESERT DISTRICT**

**NEEDLES FIELD OFFICE
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE
EL CENTRO FIELD OFFICE**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA Number CA-660-01-30**

DATE: May 10, 2001

PROJECT: Temporary restriction of motorized vehicles to specific routes in certain areas within critical desert tortoise habitat

BLM OFFICE: Needles, Palm Springs-South Coast, and El Centro Field Offices

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: Portions of eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, California

LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE and Other Regulatory Compliance:

The proposed action—restricting motorized-vehicle access to specific routes in certain areas within critical desert tortoise habitat pending completion of the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Coordinated Management Plan (NECO Plan)—conforms with the motorized-vehicle access element of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan (1980), as amended. In accordance with the CDCA Plan, motorized-vehicle use is allowed on “existing” routes of travel unless closed or limited by the authorized officer.

The proposed action is not likely to adversely affect the desert tortoise which is Federally listed as a threatened species. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will request written concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) regarding this determination as required by the Endangered Species Act.

The proposed action is in compliance with Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Subpart 8364.1, regarding closures and restrictions.

Background

On March 16, 2000, the Center for Biological Diversity, and others (Center) filed for injunctive relief in U.S. District Court, Northern District of California (court) against the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) alleging that the BLM was in violation of Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by failing to enter into formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on the effects of adoption of the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (CDCA Plan), as amended, upon threatened and endangered species. On August 25, 2000, the BLM acknowledged through a court stipulation that activities authorized, permitted, or allowed under CDCA Plan may adversely affect threatened and endangered species, and that the BLM is required to consult with the FWS to insure that adoption and implementation of the CDCA Plan is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of threatened and endangered species or to result in the destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat of listed species.

Although BLM has received biological opinions on selected activities, consultation on the overall CDCA Plan is necessary to address the cumulative effects of all the activities authorized by the CDCA Plan. Consultation on the overall Plan is complex and the completion date is uncertain. Absent consultation on the entire Plan, the impacts of individual activities, when added together with the impacts of other activities in the desert are not known. The BLM entered into negotiations with plaintiffs regarding interim actions to be taken to provide protection for endangered and threatened species pending completion of the consultation on the CDCA Plan. Agreement on these interim actions avoided litigation of plaintiffs' request for injunctive relief and the threat of an injunction prohibiting all activities authorized under the Plan. These interim agreements have allowed BLM to continue to authorize appropriate levels of activities throughout the planning area during the lengthy consultation process while providing appropriate protection to the desert tortoise and other listed species in the short term. By taking interim actions as allowed under 43 CFR Part 8364.1, BLM contributes to the conservation of endangered and threatened species in accordance with 7(a)(1) of the ESA. BLM also avoids making any irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources which would foreclose any reasonable and prudent alternative measures which might be required as a result of the consultation on the CDCA plan in accordance with 7(d) of the ESA. On March 20, 2001, the stipulation respecting All Further Injunctive Relief became effective.

One outcome of the settlement discussions is *Stipulation and Proposed Order Concerning All Further Injunctive Relief* (January 17, 2001). Paragraph 43 of the *Stipulation* states, "BLM will implement, via emergency closure published in the Federal Register, all wash closures as identified in the preferred alternative in the NECO Plan by March 1, 2001." According to Paragraph 51(I) of the *Stipulation*, this interim measure shall remain in effect until the record of decision for the NECO Plan is signed.

The Draft — Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Coordinated Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement was released on February 26, 2001, for a 90-day public comment period. In response to public requests, the comment period was extended to June 25, 2001. The planning schedule in the Draft NECO Plan/Environmental Impact Statement identifies October 15, 2001, as the approximate date for signing the Record of Decision, though it is likely that signing will occur at a later date.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the proposal herein described is to provide interim additional protection for the desert tortoise from motorized-vehicle use in habitat designated as critical for the species. Implementation of this interim action is consistent with the negotiated settlement agreement between BLM and Center for Biological Diversity et al.

Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

The Bureau of Land Management proposes to temporarily restrict motorized vehicles to specific routes in two portions of critical desert tortoise habitat, hereinafter identified as Unit 1 and Unit 2, pending completion of the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Coordinated Management Plan (NECO Plan). The areas affected by this temporary restriction are identified on Map 1 (attached) and are described as follows:

The geographic center of Unit 1 is located about 35 miles southwest of Needles, California. It is generally bounded on the north by Interstate Highway 40; on the northeast by the Camino to U.S. Highway 95 powerline road; on the east by U.S. Highway 95, except that a portion of the Chemehuevi Valley east of Highway 95, and west and northwest of the Whipple Mountains Wilderness is included in the unit; on the southeast by the Colorado River Aqueduct; on the south by the northern end of the Turtle Mountains; on the southwest by the eastern flank of the Old Woman Mountains; and on the northwest by the western boundary of the Clipper Mountains Wilderness.

The geographic center of Unit 2 is located about 50 miles east-southeast of Indio, California. It is generally bounded on the north by the southern boundary of Joshua Tree National Park and Interstate Highway 10; on the east by the southeast boundary of the Chuckwalla Mountains Wilderness and the lower northeastern boundary of the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range, though detached segments of the unit further to the east are comprised of the Little Chuckwalla Mountains Wilderness, a portion of the Palo Verde Mountains Wilderness, and the Chuckwalla Valley Dune Thicket Area of Critical Environmental Concern; and on the south and southwest by a line running southeast to northwest through the middle of the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range and extending to the boundary of Joshua Tree National Park.

Specific routes that would be available for motorized-vehicle use in Units 1 and 2 are shown on Map 2 (attached). Navigable washes characterized as “existing” routes in accordance with the CDCA Plan but not identified as specific routes available for motorized-vehicle use in Units 1 and 2 would be temporarily closed to such use.¹

¹In the context of motorized-vehicle access, the term “wash” is defined as a watercourse, either dry or with running or standing water, which by its physical nature—width, soil, slope, topography, vegetative cover, etc.—permits

This interim measure is applicable only to public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, and would remain in effect until the record of decision for the NECO Plan is signed.

Implementation

Implementation of the proposed action herein described would be limited to the installation of “NO MOTOR VEHICLES” signs in washes within Units 1 and 2—except for wash routes specifically identified on Map 2—that exhibit evidence of recent vehicle use and/or possess sufficient characteristics of “navigability” in the context of motorized-vehicle access such that future vehicle use could be anticipated. The “NO MOTOR VEHICLES” signs would be installed in such washes at intersections with routes identified on Map 2 as available for motorized-vehicle use, but would be installed only on public lands.

In addition, two brochures would be developed—one for each of the two units. Each brochure would include the “rules” for motorized-vehicle travel within and outside the units, rationale for undertaking the action, and a map showing the unit boundary and routes available for use. These brochures would be available to the public at each of the BLM offices in the California Desert as well as other appropriate sites.

the passage of motorized vehicles, thereby establishing its “navigability” (Appendix VI, CDCA Plan). An existing route of travel is a route established before approval of the CDCA Plan in 1980, with a minimum width of two feet, showing significant surface evidence of prior vehicle use or, for washes, history of prior use (1982 CDCA Plan Amendment #3).

No Action Alternative

The proposed action would not be undertaken. Motorized-vehicle use of existing routes of travel within Units 1 and 2, including navigable washes, would continue pending completion of the NECO planning process, except where a closure or restriction order has been issued, or is necessary to issue, in accordance with 43 CFR 8364.1 to protect persons, property, and public lands and resources. Existing management and use of these areas would be subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policies, and land use plans.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The area of effect relative to the proposed action occurs within designated critical desert tortoise habitat in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, California. Several standard critical elements of the human environment (Appendix 5, BLM NEPA Handbook, as amended) are not affected by the proposed action and, therefore, are not addressed in this document. These critical elements include the following:

- Cultural Resources
- Environmental Justice
- Farmlands, Prime or Unique
- Floodplains
- Native American Concerns
- Social and Economic
- Soil
- Waste, Hazardous or Solid
- Water Quality
- Wetlands/Riparian Zones
- Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Wilderness
- Wild Horses and Burros

Descriptions of critical elements and other resource elements affected by the proposed action are provided below. Effects of the proposed action on these elements are described under “Environmental Consequences.”

Air Quality

Air pollutants have the potential to affect several components of the environment including, but not limited to, humans, wildlife, fish, and vegetation. Air pollutants affect wildlife through inhalation, adsorption and/or ingestion. Populations can be directly affected through injury or death, or indirectly through contamination of their food chain or loss of habitat.

Currently, the region within which Units 1 and 2 are located is in non-compliance with both Federal and State ambient air quality standards. Fugitive dust, the primary contributor of particulate matter of 10 microns or less in size, is largely responsible for excesses of both the National and State PM10 air quality standards within the region. Local pollution sources in the desert consist primarily of particulate matter from off-road vehicles, windblown soil, mining operations, and agricultural activities.

Vegetation Management / Invasive, Non-Native Species

The region addressed by the NECO Plan, within which Units 1 and 2 are located, contains 32 special status plant species. All of these plants have Federal or State designations—endangered, threatened, candidate, or sensitive—though every species may not occur within Units 1 and 2.² Only the Coachella Valley milkvetch is Federally listed as endangered, but has not been located within the area affected by the proposed action. Several invasive, non-native species occur throughout the region, including tamarisk, red brome, cheatgrass, schizmus, Sahara mustard, fillaree, and date palm.

Wildlife Management

The desert that comprises eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties is a large and diverse region containing parts of two major deserts and a complex combination of soils, topography, vegetation, and climates. The intermingling of these elements has produced several major ecosystems within which occur many special status species.³ Chief among the special status species found in Units 1 and 2 is the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), listed as a threatened species in 1990 under the Federal Endangered Species Act. In 1994, FWS designated critical habitat for the desert tortoise and completed a recovery plan for the species.

Unit 1 is comprised of 654,549 acres, of which 359,093 acres occur outside designated wilderness (motorized vehicles are generally prohibited within wilderness). Of these acres, 334,400 are managed by BLM and would be affected by the proposed action. Unit 2 is comprised of 465,755 acres, of which 120,841 acres occur outside designated wilderness and the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range—public entry to the Gunnery Range is prohibited. Of these acres, 81,271 are managed by BLM and would be affected by the proposed action.

Livestock Grazing Management

Livestock grazing has occurred in eastern San Bernardino and Riverside Counties for many decades. In general, cattle and sheep grazing use has declined since World War II, and grazing use in this region has declined since allocations for livestock use were made in the CDCA Plan. A portion of the Lazy Daisy Allotment occurs within Unit 1. This allotment is classified for ephemeral and perennial grazing use. No other allotments occur within Units 1 or 2.

²Special status plant species in the NECO planning area include angel trumpet, Harwood's rattlesnake, Borrego milkvetch, Coachella Valley milkvetch, red grama, fairyduster, saguaro, crucifixion thorn, Los Animas colubrina or snakebush, spiny abrojo, foxtail cactus, Wiggins' croton, winged cryptantha, glandular ditaxis, California ditaxis, Howe's hedgehog cactus, crown-of-thorns, spearleaf, Robinson's monardella, Munz' cholla, Wiggins' cholla, giant Spanish-needle, white-margined beardtongue, sand food, Arizona pholistoma, lobed ground-cherry, desert unicorn plant, Orocopia sage, Coves' cassia, mesquite nest straw, jackass clover, and Mecca-aster.

³Special status animal species in the NECO planning area include desert bighorn sheep, burro deer, mountain lion, California leaf-nosed bat, occult little brown bat, cave myotis, fringed myotis, pallid bat, Townsend's big-eared bat, pocketed free-tailed bat, western mastiff bat, Colorado Valley woodrat, mountain plover, golden eagle, ferruginous hawk, prairie falcon, elf owl, burrowing owl, Gila woodpecker, vermilion flycatcher, willow flycatcher, southwestern willow flycatcher, Bendire's thrasher, crissal thrasher, LeConte's thrasher, yellow warbler, chuckwalla, Colorado Desert fringe-toed lizard, Mojave fringe-toed lizard, flat-tailed horned lizard, desert rosy boa, desert tortoise, and Couch's spadefoot toad.

Recreation Management

Off-highway vehicle touring, hunting, primitive camping in undeveloped sites, and other recreation activities that rely on large expanses of relatively unpopulated and undeveloped desert landscapes are important in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties. In general, the overall level of recreational use is currently low throughout this region except on a site-specific, seasonal basis. For instance, use in developed campgrounds and long-term visitor areas, as well as on lands adjacent to the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, is often moderate to high during the cooler months of the year. But as distances from concentrated use zones increase, there is generally a concomitant decrease in use. Regarding trends of popular recreation activities in the planning area, use appears to be neither substantially increasing nor diminishing.

Motorized-Vehicle Access

The focus of much recreational motorized-vehicle activity in the California Desert is simply driving for pleasure, or “touring.” Such touring ranges from travel on paved roads to traversing extremely difficult routes that require the use of four-wheel drive vehicles and winches. In eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, a network of routes that satisfies the desires of the touring public is an important recreation resource to be considered alongside all other resource values. Such vehicle touring, along with the use of vehicles to access recreation destinations such as trailheads and campgrounds, is considered a *casual use* of the public lands—a use not requiring specific authorization. On the other hand, *authorized use* relative to motorized-vehicle access is the use of routes approved through a permitting process for specific activities.

Within Unit 1, 472 miles of existing wash and non-wash routes have been inventoried and individually identified outside designated wilderness, excluding non-routes and partial non-routes.⁴ Within Unit 2, 337 miles of existing wash and non-wash routes have been inventoried and individually identified outside both designated wilderness and the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range, excluding non-routes and partial non-routes.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (1976) defines an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) as an area “within the public lands where special management attention is required (when such areas are developed or used or where no development is required) to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes, or to protect life and safety from natural hazards.”

Several ACECs occurring within Units 1 and 2 were designated through the CDCA Plan. The resource values for the which these ACECs were designated to protect are identified in the following table.

⁴Non-routes are previously-existing routes which have been substantially reclaimed by the forces of nature. Some of these non-routes are delineated as existing routes on the most recent versions of 1:24,000 U.S.G.S. maps. Nevertheless, an on-the-ground survey revealed that such routes (1) cannot be located due to complete or near-complete reclamation, (2) are intermittently visible thereby encouraging intermittent cross-country travel where evidence of the route disappears, and/or (3) have been re-vegetated to the extent that, although visible, travel upon them would require the crushing of substantial vegetation.

Unit	Name of ACEC	Resource Values
1	Turtle Mountains National Natural Landmark (only a very small portion of its northeast corner is within Unit 1)	Scenery
2	Chuckwalla Bench	Wildlife Habitat
	Chuckwalla Valley Dune Thicket	Wildlife Habitat
	Corn Springs	Prehistoric/Historic Values Scenery Wildlife Habitat Vegetation

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Proposed Action

Air Quality

Air quality would not likely be measurably enhanced by limiting motorized-vehicle activity within Units 1 and 2 to specific routes of travel as depicted on Map 2. Whereas motorized-vehicle use has the potential to produce airborne particulate matter, the overall production of such matter is largely dependent on the total volume and characteristics of vehicle use. It is anticipated that implementation of the proposed action would not result in a substantial decrease in the volume of vehicle use, if any decrease at all given the network of existing routes still available for use, nor would it likely result in a change to the characteristics of vehicle use (e.g., increases in vehicle speed whereupon increased levels of airborne particulate matter generally occur).

Vegetation Management / Invasive, Non-Native Species

Driving in washes occurs mostly in Desert Dry Wash Woodland south of Interstate Highway 10 from November through April. Use of navigable washes by motorized vehicles may result in loss of native vegetation along banks of the wash, or in adjacent areas as drivers leave the wash for the purposes of stopping, parking, and vehicle camping. Exotic plant species may be carried by vehicles to areas previously devoid of such species. The navigable washes affected by the proposed action have not been individually identified, hence, impacts to habitats and rare plant species from current use cannot be quantitatively assessed. However, such impacts are believed to be minimal concomitant with the low level of dispersed recreation use in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, and Units 1 and 2 in particular. Therefore, benefits to habitats and rare plant species accrued from implementation of the proposed action are anticipated to also be minimal. Likewise, reductions in the spread of invasive, non-native species are also anticipated to be minimal.

Wildlife Management

Various recreational activities, such as camping, hunting, target shooting, rock-hounding, and rock climbing, can affect wildlife in localized areas. Within Units 1 and 2, motorized-vehicle access is generally required to undertake these activities.

Limiting surface-disturbing activities—such as prohibitions on driving in certain washes—would have a

positive impact on many special status and non-special status species by potentially reducing impacts to habitats, though the degree of positive impact is undetermined. The potential for adverse effects is probably greatest where disturbances occur at a critical habitat feature, such as a spring or cave, or in rare habitats, such as dunes or playas. Wildlife displacement in critical seasons, such as when young are being reared, can be significant.

As desert tortoises commonly travel in washes and use the banks of washes for burrowing, restricting motorized-vehicle use to specific routes, thereby prohibiting use of certain navigable washes within Units 1 and 2, would reduce tortoise mortality and crushing of burrows to some extent. Consequently, the proposed action will positively affect the Federally listed desert tortoise.

Bighorn sheep and burro deer would receive added protection from the closure of certain washes near water developments. Wash closures near some significant bat roosts, prairie falcon and golden eagle eyries, Couch's spadefoot toad habitat, and habitat for other sensitive species would reduce the likelihood of disturbance at a critical site. However, reductions in disturbances to wildlife species would be minimal given the low level of dispersed recreation use in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, and Units 1 and 2 in particular.

Livestock Grazing Management

The proposed action is generally applicable to *casual* motorized-vehicle use, that is, vehicular access not requiring a specific authorization. *Authorized use* in the context of motorized-vehicle access is the use of routes approved through a permitting process for specific activities. As livestock grazing in the Lazy Daisy Allotment is an authorized use, the proposed action is not directly applicable to motorized-vehicle activities associated with such use. Therefore, the proposed action would have no effect on livestock grazing.

Recreation Management

The network of existing routes available for casual use after closure of washes in accordance with the proposed action—472 and 337 miles of routes within Units 1 and 2, respectively—would provide reasonable access for both motorized and non-motorized recreational activities. Except for wilderness areas wherein casual motorized-vehicle use is prohibited, recreationists would be able to drive their vehicles within reasonable proximity to most public lands within the two units.

Limiting motorized-vehicle travel in Units 1 and 2 would not significantly affect hunting opportunities. Although vehicular access to historic hunting areas would be reduced upon closure of wash routes traditionally used for access, sufficient access would be provided by the remaining routes available for use. The proposed action may improve the hunting experience for those seeking solitude and/or quietude as part of their recreational hunting endeavor by restricting motorized-vehicle access to an identified network of existing routes.

The quality of other non-motorized recreational pursuits may be enhanced by the proposed action. The use of vehicles is often necessary to transport hikers or equestrians to trailheads—especially in the remote desert areas within Units 1 and 2—but once engaged in their non-motorized recreational pursuits, the close proximity of off-highway vehicles generally diminishes the quality of back country experiences by adversely affecting solitude and quietude. To the extent that motorized-vehicle use would be precluded in certain areas of the two units, opportunities to realize solitude and quietude would be enhanced, though to an unknown degree.

According to the Motorized-Vehicle Element of the CDCA Plan, as amended, stopping, parking, and vehicle camping are allowed within 300 feet of routes except within sensitive areas such as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) where the limit is 100 feet. With increased restrictions on the number of existing routes available for motorized-vehicle use, as would occur with implementation of the proposed action, comes a concomitant reduction in the extent of area available for stopping, parking, and vehicle camping. However, given that 809 miles of existing routes within Units 1 and 2 would be available for use, along which opportunities for stopping, parking, and vehicle camping would remain, the closure of certain washes as proposed would not substantially affect opportunities for such activities.

Motorized-Vehicle Access

The closure of certain washes in accordance with the proposed action would affect casual motorized-vehicle access as described above under "Recreation Management." Access for *other* than casual purposes (access related to activities which require specific authorizations) would be addressed through the applicable permitting process.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

The proposed action would not affect scenery and prehistoric/historic values for which some ACECs in Units 1 and 2 were designated to protect. Impacts to resource values of wildlife habitat and vegetation in ACECs are addressed above.

No Action Alternative

Air Quality

Whereas positive effects on air quality resulting from the closure of certain washes as proposed would be negligible, so would negative effects consequent to adoption of the No Action Alternative. Negligible adverse effects would include the production of airborne particulate matter from the passage of motorized vehicles in washes.

Vegetation Management

Whereas positive effects on habitats and rare plant species from the closure of certain washes as proposed are anticipated to be minimal given the low level of dispersed recreation use in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, particularly within Units 1 and 2, negative effects consequent to adoption of the No Action Alternative are likewise anticipated to be minimal. Such adverse effects would include loss of native vegetation along wash banks and adjacent areas, and the spread of exotic plant species.

Wildlife Management

Current levels of disturbances and/or mortality to several special status species—including desert tortoise, bighorn sheep, bats, prairie falcons, golden eagles, and Couch's spadefoot toad—and non-special status species would not change. The potential for reduced tortoise mortality and crushing of burrows within certain washes would not be diminished. Bighorn sheep and burro deer would not receive additional protection near water developments. The potential for disturbing some significant bat roosts, prairie falcon and golden eagle eyries, Couch's spadefoot toad habitat, and habitat for other sensitive species would not be reduced. However, existing disturbances are already low due to the low level of dispersed recreation use in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, especially within Units 1 and 2.

Livestock Grazing Management

Access to lands within the Lazy Daisy Allotment for the management of livestock grazing would not be changed.

Recreation Management

Existing opportunities for motorized recreational activities, including stopping, parking, and vehicle camping, would be maintained. Recreational activities of a non-motorized nature may be adversely affected concomitant with continued use of all existing routes. This is especially true where a component of the non-motorized activity is solitude and/or quietude. However, the degree to which non-motorized activities would be affected in this manner is unknown.

Motorized-Vehicle Access

The current motorized-vehicle access network for casual use would be maintained—impacts to motorized-vehicle access, therefore, would not occur. Access for *other* than casual purposes would continue to be addressed through the applicable permitting process.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

Adoption of the No Action Alternative would not affect scenery and prehistoric/historic values for which some ACECs in Units 1 and 2 were designated to protect. Impacts to resource values of wildlife habitat and vegetation in ACECs are addressed above.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Air Quality

Although development in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties has been historically low and little urban growth is expected, especially in Units 1 and 2, air quality in non-attainment areas could continue to be impacted by the exportation of urban (Los Angeles and San Diego) smog to remote regions in the desert. Additionally, particulate matter of 10 microns or less in size may continue to be a problem in areas affected by surface disturbance from uses such as grazing, recreation, and large soil-disturbing projects. However, restrictions on motorized-vehicle use as proposed are not likely to substantially reduce, or contribute to, particulate matter in the region.

Vegetation Management

The existing planning environment provides a relatively high level of protection for vegetation communities in Units 1 and 2. This is due, in part, to the extent of designated wilderness within the two units, and the restrictions on public access to the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range in Unit 2. Casual use impacts are generally low throughout eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties as visitation is low and seasonal, and concentrated in specific areas. The reduced area available for motorized-vehicle use within Units 1 and 2 as proposed would marginally increase the overall level of protection for vegetative communities.

Wildlife Management

Overall, impacts to wildlife from human activities are low in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties, especially within Units 1 and 2. In part, this is because a high proportion of the two units is in reserve-level management (i.e., wilderness areas in both units and the much of the Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range in Unit 2). The reduced extent of vehicle use within Units 1 and 2 would provide increased protection against habitat disturbance and other negative effects of human activities in an area, though such increased protection would be minimal.

Livestock Grazing Management

The proposed action as herein described would result in no additional impacts to grazing activities or the management thereof.

Recreation Management

Increased restrictions on motorized-vehicle access cumulatively affect opportunities for motorized recreation in an adverse manner, though to a minimal degree. The number of routes on which one may drive for pleasure, or enjoy “touring” activities, would decrease. There is a concomitant decrease in opportunities for stopping, parking, and vehicle camping with increasing limitations on access. Such restrictions are consistent with an apparent trend over the last several years to limit motorized recreation in ways that would minimize the potential for damage to natural and cultural resource values. Whether this trend will continue is unknown.

Conversely, opportunities to escape the sights and sounds of the mechanized world would be increased, though to a small extent. The limitations on motorized-vehicle travel are not such that access to sites for non-motorized activities would be substantially affected. The availability of additional opportunities for these activities is consistent with an apparent trend in recent years to favor non-motorized recreation recognizing that such activities generally have less potential for damaging resource values than motorized activities.

Motorized-Vehicle Access

Motorized-vehicle access and opportunities for recreation are closely linked in the California Desert. The cumulative effects on limiting motorized-vehicle access as herein proposed, therefore, are the same as described above under “Recreation Management.”

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

The cumulative effects to resource values of wildlife habitat and vegetation in ACECs are addressed above.

PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED:

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